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Mr. President, Meet the Press

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It's a shame President Bush shuns regular press conferences, and that the news media barely objects; in two and a half years he has held only nine formal news conferences, a record low for the modern presidency.

Sunday night the president began to level about the costs and difficulties of the Iraqi occupation. But his U-turn from a disastrous postwar policy raises many questions. A news conference not only might illuminate the public but force the president to focus more on these quandaries; among many questions, a half dozen might include:

If Iraqi institutions and people, after decades of brutal Baathist rule, are in far worse shape than we anticipated, how can we expeditiously turn control over to the Iraqis?

The president insisted Sunday night that Iraq is "ready to take the next steps toward self-government." Yet, this flies in the face of the picture the administration paints of a frightfully unstable country and people.

"What we might have underestimated," Secretary of State Colin Powell acknowledged, was that "all the institutions would collapse. We didn't realize how rotten the whole place was . . . political institutions, military police . . ." This is not an environment conducive to early elections. What would we do if the most organized and passionate elements, also the most anti-American, prevailed?

The war on terrorism, you said, "will require sacrifice?" Other than men and women in uniform, whom will you call on to make sacrifices?

Some congressional Republicans suggest the spiraling costs and the record-high budget deficits mean the death knell for a costly Medicare prescription drug plan. Instead, how about freezing the Bush tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans, which would provide enough to pay for the Iraqi reconstruction and also a new prescription drug benefit? As Sen. Joe Biden noted this week, just skipping the tax cut for the top 1% for one year would just about fund the president's \$87 billion Iraqi request: "If this is to be a long, drawn out and costly fight against terror, how can we wage this fight without paying any price beyond that being paid by our soldiers?" asks the Delaware Democrat.

If Mr. Bush considers these lower taxes for the wealthy untouchable then who instead will make sacrifices.

Does the sanctity of the tax cuts and the reality of massive budget deficits crowd out even homeland security measures, such as protecting commercial airliners from shoulder-launched missiles?

An open society can't fully protect against all acts of terrorism. Yet experts say there are glaring deficiencies, inadequate funding for first responders, and American ports remain highly vulnerable. Another risk is the failure to outfit America's 6,800 commercial aircraft with anti-portable missile technology.

This is not a far-fetched scare tactic. It's estimated there are more than a half-million shoulder-launched missiles around the world. Al Qaeda probably has hundreds, most of them the Stinger surface-to-air missiles that we supplied to anti-Soviet Afghan rebels 15 years ago; according to Jane's Intelligence Review, more than two dozen other guerrilla and terrorist groups possess shoulder-launched missiles. Israel is outfitting all its commercial airliners. Our cost would be far greater - about \$10 billion - but one successful attack would decimate the airline industry and public confidence.

"By refusing to accelerate deployment of SAM counter measures for our commercial planes," charges Rep. **Steve Israel** (D., N.Y.), the chief House sponsor of a measure to fund electronic surface-to-air missile defense systems on U.S. airlines, "the president is leaving us exposed to a glaring vulnerability."

David Kaye may discover weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, not of the scope and lethality cited as the casus belli for the war; was this an intelligence failure or do you think some of those weapons are in others' hands?

National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice this week, asked by Katie Couric on the "Today" show about the WMD embarrassment, replied: "It's very simple. Saddam Hussein is no longer in power, and Saddam Hussein was the problem with weapons of mass destruction . . . Let's be very clear, removing Saddam Hussein removes the threat of weapons of mass destruction." Okay, it doesn't matter if chemical or biological weapons -- the nuke threat always was hyped by administration hard-liners -- are now in the hands of Saddam henchmen, or other terrorists?

A broad-based consensus concurs with Republican Sen. Chuck Hagel that the administration did a "miserable job" in postwar planning; will there be any personal responsibility?

Defense Secretary Don Rumsfeld said the overall costs would be "under \$50 billion," dismissing as "baloney" estimates it would cost hundreds of billions of dollars; that latter level now may be conservative. He and his deputy, Paul Wolfowitz, ridiculed top Army general Eric Shinseki for predicting more troops would be required after the war. Mr. Wolfowitz assured lawmakers that Iraqi oil revenues soon would pay for the reconstruction. Despite intelligence warnings of significant armed opposition to U.S. occupation, Vice President Cheney insisted American troops would be widely hailed as liberators. Against the advice of experts, the Pentagon was placed in charge of reconstruction. Douglas Feith, the top Rumsfeld aide who bungled this crucial task, is still the man in charge.

Finally, one reader e-mails angrily about Secretary Wolfowitz's report of 9/11 family members recently traveling to Iraq to thank the American soldiers there for continuing the war against terrorism. It was a moving tale but the implication plainly was to connect Saddam and 9/11, a link that the administration desperately has tried to make without success. The reader suggests a simple query to the president:

Who gave more financial support to the 9/11 al Qaeda terrorists: the Iraqi ruling class under Saddam or the Saudi Arabian ruling class?

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